

Everything Good is Bad For You

While we were developing Reddit, we always used to run into people who'd recognize us and come up to say hi. "Oh, wow," they'd say to us. "I can't tell you how much your site has killed my productivity. I check it a hundred times every day." At first, we just laughed these comments off. But after a while, I begun to find them increasingly disturbing. We'd set out to make something people want — but what if they didn't want to want it?

For too long, simple popularity has been the only metric of a startup's success. Another startup, known as Twitter, has recently broken into the mainstream. And I constantly hear people saying things like "Yeah, well, I know it seems like a pointless waste of time. But it's so *popular!*" As if anything so popular had to be worthwhile.

Cory Doctorow recently [made a similar argument](#). When he publishes his books online, he notes, people are always telling him they don't like reading off a screen. And yet, these very same people spend every free hour of the day reading email and weblogs and news articles off a screen. "It's like watching someone shovel Mars Bars into his gob while telling you how much he hates chocolate," Doctorow complains. Doctorow's conclusion? Blogs are just better.

But I think Mars Bars are just the right analogy. Everyone in America knows that it's easy to accidentally find yourself stuffing your face with junk food when you're not paying attention. But no one would seriously maintain that junk food is better than fine cuisine. It's just *easier*.

Similarly, if you printed out all the blog posts and news articles and emails the average timewaster reads in a month and placed the resulting hulking volume down next to a copy of, say, *War and Peace* (which it would no doubt dwarf), it's hard to imagine the average person saying they'd actually prefer to sit down and read the first. (If *War and Peace* doesn't strike your fancy, substitute a similarly large tome.) But reading bite-sized blog posts is by far *easier*.

The same goes for reading stories on Reddit or your friends' pointless twits about their life. Looking at photos of sunsets or reading one-liners takes no cognitive effort. It's the mental equivalent of snack food. You start eating one and before you know it you've gone through two cans of Pringles and become a world expert on Evan Williams' travel habits.

We need to stop pretending that this is automatically a good thing. Perhaps Procter & Gamble doesn't care of their making us into a nation of fat slobs, but there's no reason why programmers and the rest of the startup world need to be so amoral. And no doubt, as pictures of cats with poor spelling on them become all the rage, people are beginning to wonder about where all this idiocy is leaving us. Which is where apologists like Doctorow and Steven Johnson step in, assuring us that Everything Bad is Good For You.

It isn't. YouTube isn't going to save us from an *Idiocracy*-style future in which everyone sits at home and watches shows like "Ow! My Balls!" (in which a man is repeatedly hit in the balls) — YouTube's damn-near creating that future. As I write this, YouTube's #1 featured video is titled "Farting in Public".

It doesn't have to be that way, of course. Nobody prefers farting to thought. It's just that, as David Foster Wallace noted about television, "people tend to be extremely similar in their vulgar and prurient and dumb interests and wildly different in their refined and aesthetic and noble interests." Similarly, no one (Doctorow included, I suspect), actually prefers blog posts to novels, it's just that people tend to have more short chunks of time to read blog posts than they do long chunks of time to read novels.

Technology was supposed to let us solve these problems. But technology never solves things by itself. At bottom, it requires people to sit down and build tools that solve them. Which, as long as programmers are all competing to create the world's most popular timewaster, it doesn't seem like anyone is going to do.

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